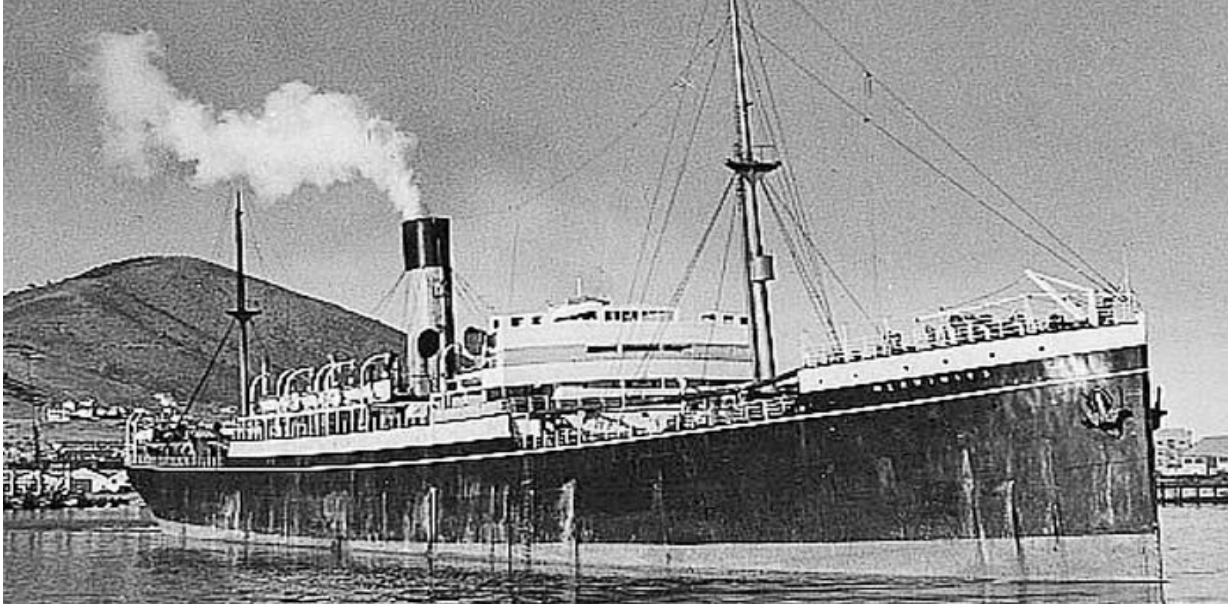


# The Wild Bunch on the High Seas

By Mark Mszanski



*The passenger and freight steamer SS Herminius built in 1898 by Russell and Company, Greenock, Scotland.*

**B**y early 1901, the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency and the local authorities were hot on the heels of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Several of their confederates had already been arrested or killed, and by the end of the year, three more were in jail or dead. Butch and Sundance had other plans: flee the country.<sup>1</sup> In February, they showed up in New York City with Sundance now accompanied by a mystery woman, Ethel Place.<sup>2</sup> The Pinkertons described her as "said to be his wife and to be from Texas."<sup>3</sup> Late that month, the trio boarded a steamship bound some 5,300 miles south, to Buenos Aires.

## **In Search of Shipping Records**

Very little has ever been nailed down using actual shipping records about the Wild Bunch trio's travels to South America, and so I decided to see what I could find out. British steam ships had a dominant role in trade between the United States and Argentina: at least five British lines offered freight and passenger service from New York to South America.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, I made my first call to the National Archives in Kew, England, and was quickly sent back across the Atlantic to the Maritime History

Archive at the Memorial University in Newfoundland—still part of the British Commonwealth—which houses crew agreements and ship records from the early 1900s. An MHA archivist told me that a ship's master was mandated by law to keep detailed crew records and agreements for each voyage, and that voyages could last upward of two years.<sup>5</sup>

Based on Pinkerton records, Wild Bunch literature, and sailing dates published in New York newspapers, the trio had likely taken the *Herminius* or the *Bellarden* to Argentina in late February, and Sundance and Ethel had traveled on the *Soldier Prince* and the *Honourous* on their round-trip voyage in 1902 between Buenos Aires and New York.<sup>6</sup> All four were British ships, thus, I commissioned the MHA archivists to look for any records for voyages by those four ships between 1901 and 1902.

## **Escaping New York in 1901**

The Pinkertons reported that the trio had sailed for Buenos Aires on February 20, although newspapers said that departures had been delayed by ice flows on the Hudson and East Rivers, so they might have boarded on the 20th and actually sailed a day or two later.<sup>7</sup>

Butch and Sundance had never made their bones on a ship nor lived anywhere near the open sea. They were cowboys who made a living robbing payrolls, banks, and trains. As "landsmen," a nautical term for newcomers on a ship, they would be on their first high-seas journey, one lasting about a month.

While in New York (and Argentina, as well), Butch adopted the name James Ryan, and Sundance and Ethel went by Harry A. Place and Ethel Place, respectively, and collectively as Mr. and Mrs. H. A. Place.<sup>8</sup>

### All Aboard

The trio would have taken the Hamilton Avenue Ferry at the foot of Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan, near the present Staten Island Ferry Whitehall Terminal, to get to the Atlantic Dock in Brooklyn to board ships like the *Herminius* or the *Bellarden* bound for South America.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Pinkertons had said that the trio had departed on February 20, they did not name the ship. However, there were only two ships sailing for Buenos Aires in late February, the *Herminius* and the *Bellarden*. The scheduled departure of the *Herminius* was delayed until perhaps as late as the 22nd, and the departure of the *Bellarden* until the 23rd.<sup>10</sup>

The helpful archivists in Newfoundland found certificates, crew lists, and other data for all the ships in question. Here is some relevant information:

The *Herminius*, large for her time at 3,548 gross registered tons, was built in 1898 in Glasgow.<sup>11</sup> The ship's master, John Morrison, sailed her for the British and South American Steamship Navigation Company, owned by the R.P. Houston Line. The *Herminius* carried crude oil, mail, and passengers between the United States and South America.<sup>12</sup>

According to a British consular departure stamp, the *Herminius* left Brooklyn on February 20, arrived in Montevideo, across the River Plate estuary from Buenos Aires, on March 24, and reached Buenos Aires on March 26.<sup>13</sup>

Bell Bros. and McLelland of Glasgow owned the *Bellarden*, a freighter offering limited passenger service, with a capacity of 2,715 gross registered tons. Master Alexander Davidson would sail the *Bellarden* south from Brooklyn to Montevideo, arriving March 21, and then to Buenos Aires, arriving the 23rd.<sup>14</sup> Passengers

could disembark in Montevideo and catch an overnight ferry to Buenos Aires, thus saving a day.<sup>15</sup>

Pinkerton detective Frank Dimaio, who was in Buenos Aires in early 1903 investigating Butch and Sundance, said that Sundance had opened an account at the London and River Plate Bank there on March 23, 1901, depositing 2,000 Bank of England pound notes.<sup>16</sup> If he had the date correct, that would eliminate the *Herminius* from the short list of possible ships.

I found no one using the outlaws' known aliases on the crew lists for the *Herminius* and the *Bellarden*, meaning that whichever ship they favored, they presumably traveled as passengers. The MHA records do not include passenger lists, nor for that matter do Ancestry.com's records of ships outgoing from U.S. A dead end.

The trio did not waste much time in establishing a ranch in Argentina.<sup>17</sup> As early as June, they were in Patagonia buying horses.<sup>18</sup> On July 18, they asked a local notary, feliciously named D. Brand, to file their brand requests with the Chubut Territorial Government. Their letter to Brand indicated that they had formed a partnership: Place y Ryan.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, they obtained three brand approvals, for a reverse P running R, a rocking R, and a stylized OK.<sup>20</sup>

### Fruits, Vegetables, and Outlaws Shipped Back to Brooklyn

Sundance and Ethel returned to the U.S. in 1902. The Pinkertons learned that both had visited a hospital in May 1902, though neither the name of the hospital nor the nature of the ailments are in the report.<sup>21</sup>

Butch stayed in Patagonia, getting their ranch organized. On May 16, 1902, he joined 17 neighbors in petitioning the Ministry of Agriculture about their homesteading rights.<sup>22</sup> In August, he wrote to a friend in Utah, saying that "I like the place better every day. I have 300 cattle, 1500 sheep, and 28 good saddle horses, 2 men to do my work, also good 4 room house, wearhouse [sic] stable, chicken house and some chickens."

During his early 1903 investigations in Buenos Aires, Dimaio confirmed that Sundance and Ethel had returned to the U.S. the previous year, departing in March on the *Soldier Prince* and returning a few months later on the *Honorius*, arriving in Buenos Aires August 9.

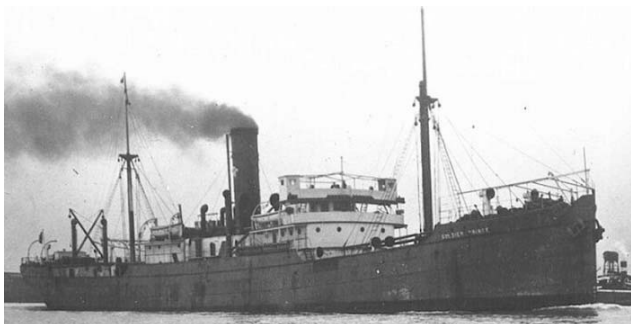
He also learned more details about their initial

arrival in South America with Butch in 1901. Dimaio had with him photographs of the trio, which he showed to personnel at, among other places, the U.S. Legation, shipping lines, hotels, and the London and River Plate Bank. A clerk porter at the Prince Line recognized a "photo of "P[lace] & wife" as having sailed on the *Soldier Prince* the previous March.<sup>24</sup> The manager of the River Plate bank, "when shown photographs of these people, . . . readily recognized them." Dimaio also shared photographs of the trio with American vice-consul, George Newbery, who said that "Harry A. Place, his wife, and James Ryan," had a ranch near his and that they "were considered respectable citizens."<sup>25</sup>

The *Soldier Prince* was a British steamer owned by James Knott's Prince Line, Newcastle upon the Tyne, England. The ship carried fruits and vegetables from Argentina to the U.S., and the particular voyage that carried Sundance and Ethel, had departed Buenos Aires on March 1, 1902.<sup>26</sup>

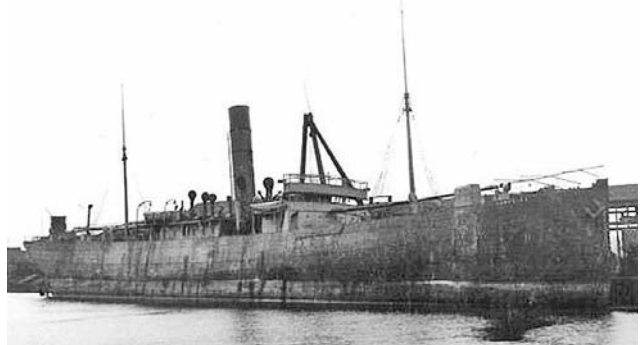
It seems likely that Sundance and Ethel had shipped out on the *Soldier Prince* as passengers rather than crew, because they were identified by the line's Buenos Aires clerk porter, who processed passenger tickets and loaded baggage on board. Furthermore, MHA records did not show any known alias of Sundance and Ethel as crew members.

The *Soldier Prince* arrived in Brooklyn on April 3, at the newly built Bush Shipping Terminal, carrying seven passengers, among them presumably Sundance and Ethel.<sup>27</sup> Wealthy businessman Irving T. Bush had built the terminal on top of a landfill, extending the terminal to rail lines that abutted his warehouses.<sup>28</sup> He had made a fortune importing fruits and other perishables and on this particular occa-



*The S.S. Soldier Prince cargo ship built and commissioned in 1901 by William and Dobson Co. for the Prince Line LTD. (Courtesy Tyne Built Ships – A History of Tyne Shipbuilders and the Ships They Built.)*

sion had brought in two outlaws, coincidentally code named by the Pinkertons as fruits. In its communications with the Buenos Aires police, the agency referred to Sundance as "Lemons" and Ethel as "Peaches." (Butch was "Citron.")<sup>29</sup>



*Cargo steamship Honorius launched 1/28/1899 for the R. P. Houston Line was the ship taken back to Buenos Aires by the Sundance Kid and Ethel Place in 1902.*

### **The Chief Purser and Stewardess Sign In**

In July, Sundance and Ethel headed back to Argentina on the *Honourious*. Weighing in at 3,476 gross registered tons and mastered by A. Livingston, the ship sailed for the British and South American Steam Navigation Company owned by the R.P. Houston Line.<sup>30</sup>

Sundance, traveling as H.A. Place, and Ethel, traveling as Mrs. H.A. Place, hired on as crew for the return voyage, perhaps to save money. An early 1900s second-class fare from New York to Buenos Aires was \$90, about \$2,602 in today's money, or the equivalent of \$5,840 for two.<sup>31</sup> (This means that the trio's 1901 voyage to Argentina set them back the modern equivalent of \$7,860.) Most of the crew provided discharge books (known as D.A. books), which were essentially resumes of their maritime work experience. Sundance and Ethel didn't provide any, presumably because they had never crewed before. They were rookies, listed in the records as being on their "first vessel."<sup>32</sup>

Regardless, the duo must have made a good impression, because they were hired and ordered to appear "at once." They boarded the ship on July 8, and sailed the next day. Among the rules they were expected to follow were no firearms and no alcohol, with fines of up to five shillings per violation. Other forms of misconduct could result in docked pay or discharge at the nearest port.<sup>33</sup> Sundance signed the crew log as H.A. Place, 34, and under nationality wrote Texas. Ethel signed as

H.A. Place (purser) and Mrs. H.A. Place (stewardess) signatures, *Honorius* crew log.

Mrs. H.A. Place, 20, nationality USA. They were listed as chief purser and ship's stewardess, respectively.<sup>34</sup>

Sundance's H.A. Place crew-log signature is consistent with his signatures on documents in Argentina and as well with an undated trace or copy made by the Pinkertons, presumably off a hotel or hospital registry in New York City or Buffalo. Ethel's crew-log signature as Mrs. H.A. Place is the first known example of her actual autograph, and looks very much like the Pinkerton tracing, which she signed as Ethel Place. In both instances, she favored the upper and lowercase Greek E.<sup>35</sup>

As chief purser, Sundance would have been responsible for the management of all the monies disbursed on board, including the purchase of supplies and payment of wages for the crew. I was amused by the fact that one of the most wanted outlaws of the era would oversee the money on a large British steam ship. Ethel, as stewardess, was in charge of the ship's laundry and meals, serving both officers and crew. A note under each of their names stated that they were to be "discharged at Buenos Aires," probably by an agreement struck in advance.<sup>36</sup>

The *Honorius* made port in Buenos Aires on

August 10, and the ship's freight was discharged the following day. Mr. & Mrs. Place were listed as remaining on board until August 13, perhaps to finish their duties and prepare the ship for her next passage. Under the category "wages paid" there were no entries for Place or Mrs. Place. All other crew members were paid.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Sundance and Ethel had bartered their labor in return for free passage to Buenos Aires.

One final *Honorius* related document is a puzzler:

I hereby certify the within named Mr. H.A. Place and (Mrs.) H.A. Place and C. Schmidt [the ship's cook] have been left behind at this port on the alleged ground of their having deserted and that I have inquired into the matter and have found the allegations to be true and that proper entries unto the official log book have been produced by me.<sup>38</sup>

In maritime law, "desertion" is an unauthorized absence from a ship with no intention of returning, the penalty for which is usually forfeiture of unpaid wages.<sup>39</sup> Sundance and Ethel, however, had signed on the *Honorius* for only the voyage to Buenos Aires, so their obligation to the ship ended there. It seems likely that they were clas-



H.A. Place desertion in Buenos Aires.

sified as deserters so as to relieve the shipping line of responsibility for paying their passage back to the U.S.<sup>40</sup>

Sundance and Ethel are thought to have sailed to the U.S. again in 1904, and in mid-1905. Ethel might have returned home for good in 1906, sailing up the west coast of South America to California, perhaps using the name Ethel Matthews.<sup>41</sup> For all practical purposes, she

disappears from the story. The details of those last voyages are not known. Butch, however stayed put until early 1905, when all three fled Cholila, fearing imminent arrest. In December 1905, the threesome robbed a bank in Villa Mercedes in central Argentina, after which Ethel disappeared. Sundance and Butch later moved on to Bolivia, for the next chapter of their lives.<sup>42</sup>

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the staff at the National Archives, Kew England, and the Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, for their essential role in this endeavor.

**Mark Mszanski became interested in Wild West history at an early age. His focus is doing research on the Butch Cassidy's outlaw gang known as the Wild Bunch. He lives in New Jersey and is executive vice president of sales for Grid Gain Systems of Foster City, CA.**



### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For more information on Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, see Mike Bell, *Incidents on Owl Creek: Butch Cassidy's Big Horn Basin Bunch and the Wyoming Horsethief War* (Leeds, England: Book Empire, 2013); Bill Betenson, *Butch Cassidy, My Uncle* (Glendo, WY: High Plains Press, 2014); Donna Ernst, *The Sundance Kid: The Life of Harry Alonzo Longabaugh* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009); Thom Hatch, *The Last Outlaws: The Lives and Legends of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (NY: New American Library: 2013); Anne Meadows, *Digging Up Butch and Sundance* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, rev. ed., 2003); and Richard Patterson, *Butch Cassidy: A Biography* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
- <sup>2</sup> Often referred to incorrectly in the newspapers of the era as Etta Place, she actually went by Ethel Place. See Daniel Buck, "How Ethel Became Etta Place," *Wild West*, February 2013, and "More on Ethel/Etta Place," *Wild West*, April 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> "New York Criminal History 7111, All Offices, July 29, 1902," folder 4, box 93, Pinkerton's National Detective Agency Records (MSS 13593), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. (Hereafter, cited as Pinkerton Records.)
- <sup>4</sup> *Trow (formerly Wilson's) Copartnership and Corporation Directory of New York City* (NY: Trow, 1901).
- <sup>5</sup> Kory Penny, Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland (hereafter cited as MHA), personal communication with author, October 24, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> "New York Criminal History 7111," July 29, 1902, and handwritten, untitled notes by Frank Dimaio of his March 1903 Buenos Aires visit, Pinkerton Records; Ernst, 134-39.
- <sup>7</sup> "New York Criminal History 7111," July 29, 1902, Pinkerton Records. The memorandum is awkwardly written, saying that Sundance and Ethel sailed on February 20, and returned on April 3, 1902, but that there is no record of Butch having ever returned. A reasonable reading is that all three sailed on the 20th; "Battling With Ice Flows," *New York Tribune*, February 14, 1901.
- <sup>8</sup> "New York Criminal History 7111," July 29, 1902, Pinkerton Records; Ernst, 130-34.
- <sup>9</sup> Maggie L. Blanck, "Life in New York," *Life in New York*, <http://www.maggielblanck.com/NewYork/Life.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> "Shipping and Foreign Mails," *New York Times*, February 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23, 1901.
- <sup>11</sup> "Ship's Record," *Herminius*, IMO/Off. No. 109442, 1898, Voyages 1901-1902, MHA.
- <sup>12</sup> Paul Dvorkovitz, ed., *The Petroleum and Technical Review*, vol. 4, January to June, 1901, 250.
- <sup>13</sup> "Ship's Record," *Herminius*, MHA.

- <sup>14</sup> "Crew Agreement," *Bellarden*, IMO/OFF. No. 96029, 1888, Voyages 1900-1901, MHA.
- <sup>15</sup> Albert B. Martinez, *Baedecker de la República Argentina* (Buenos Aires: J. Peuser, 1900), 344.
- <sup>16</sup> Untitled notes, Dimaio, 1903, Pinkerton Records. Dimaio's notes are chronological and sketchy, perhaps written more as a brief daily diary of his activities. In them, he refers to a "report 3/18/03," possibly a more detailed accounting of his activities, but that document is not in the Pinkerton Records. Decades later, Dimaio told historian James D. Horan that he had "got my first lead" at the "London and River Plate Bank." Frank P. Dimaio, letter to James D. Horan, June 14, 1949, Pinkerton Records.
- <sup>17</sup> For information on Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's time in Argentina, see Osvaldo Aguirre, *La Padilla Salvaje: Butch Cassidy en la Patagonia* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2004), and Marcelo Gavirati, *Buscados en la Patagonia: La Historia No Contada de Butch Cassidy y los Bandoleros Nrtamericanos* (Buenos Aires: Patagonia Sur Libros, 4th ed. rev., 2011).
- <sup>18</sup> Aguirre, chapter 3; Gavirati, chapter 3; Marcelo Gavirati, "Back at the Ranch," *True West*, November/December 2002; Francisco N. Juárez, "Cowboys en la Patagonia," *Co&Co* (Barcelona), no. 4, June, 1993.
- <sup>19</sup> "Solicitud de Marca desde Cholila de Butch Cassidy al Gobernador Conesa año 1901," *Archivo Histórico Digital de Cholila*, <http://archivohistoricocholila.blogspot.com/2014/09/solicitud-de-marca-desde-cholila-de.html>.
- <sup>20</sup> *Guia de la Patagonia: Guia del Chubut, Santa Cruz y Tierra del Fuego. Registro de Marcas* (Trelew, Chubut: José T. Sanchez y Cía., 1920), 127.
- <sup>21</sup> Ernst, pp. 137-39; "Des of Longbaugh & wife as given by Hospital Officials who treated both in May 1902," n.d., Pinkerton Records.
- <sup>22</sup> Gavirati, 51-52.
- <sup>23</sup> Butch Cassidy, August 10, 1902, letter to Mrs. Matilda Davis, in Betenson, 180-81; Gavirati (2002).
- <sup>24</sup> Untitled notes, Dimaio, 1903, Pinkerton Records.
- <sup>25</sup> "FPD Reports, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," September 17, 1941, Pinkerton Records.
- <sup>26</sup> N.L. Middlemiss, "Pride of the Princes": The History of the Prince Line Ltd. (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Shield Publications, 1988); *Soldier Prince*, MHA.
- <sup>27</sup> "Shipping News," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1902, 14.
- <sup>28</sup> <https://cdn.loc.gov/master/pnp/habshaer/ny/ny1600/ny1648/data/ny1648data.pdf>.
- <sup>29</sup> Ernst, 145.
- <sup>30</sup> "Crew Agreement," *Honorius*, IMO/OFF. No. 110594, 1899, Voyages 1901-1902, MHA.
- <sup>31</sup> James Davenport Whelpey, *Trade Development in Argentina*, (Washington DC: US Department of Commerce/GPO, 1911). p. 18; Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present," *Measuring Worth*, 2017, <https://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>.
- <sup>32</sup> "Crew Agreement," *Honorius*, MHA.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Daniel Buck & Anne Meadows, "New Wild Bunch Documents Surface," *True West*, August 1997; Ernst, 96.
- <sup>36</sup> "Crew Agreement," *Honorius*, MHA.
- <sup>37</sup> "Crew Agreement," *Honorius*, MHA.
- <sup>38</sup> "Certificates Or Endorsements made by Consuls or by Officers in British Possessions Abroad," *Honorius*, MHA. Desertions had to be reported to the nearest British Consul office, and a two shilling fee paid, per deserter.
- <sup>39</sup> Section 220 of the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894, which presumably governed the Prince Line in 1901, discusses "desertion": [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukga/1894/60/pdfs/ukpga\\_18940060\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukga/1894/60/pdfs/ukpga_18940060_en.pdf).
- <sup>40</sup> "Seamen, Destitute Americans - Transportation," A-3403, October 20, 1924, *Decisions of the Comptroller General of the United States*, vol. 4, July 1, 1924 to June 30, 1925, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1925), 390-91. Even though the decision relates to a case under U.S. law, it offers a reasonable explanation for why the master of the *Honorius* would have officially classified Mr. and Mrs. H.A. Place as deserters.
- <sup>41</sup> Daniel Gibbon, interview, in Daniel Buck and Anne Meadows, "Neighbors on the Hot Seat: Revelations from the Long-Lost Argentine Police File," *WOLA Journal*, vol. V, no. 2, Spring-Summer 1996; Meadows, 64, 79; Ernst, 148, and 159-60.
- <sup>42</sup> Aguirre, 209-229; Gavirati, 129-139; Meadows, 93-94, 250, and 302; Daniel Buck and Anne Meadows, "Al final del camino: Butch Cassidy y Sundance Kid en Bolivia," *Fuentes* (La Paz), vol. 10, no. 48, October 2016.